

Washington, 19 June (ENI/RNS)--Indian government officials have denied visas to commissioners of a U.S. religious freedom watchdog panel for the second time since 2000, Religion News Service reports.

Members of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** were forced to cancel their plans to assess religious freedom in India. Panellists, who were scheduled to leave on 12 June, have been trying to obtain Indian visas for the past seven years.

Nina Shea, a commissioner, said it is troublesome that the Indian authorities are so defensive about exposing potential religious violence in the world's largest democracy.

"I believe at the root of this, they want to cover it up," she said. "They have something to hide."

Hindu organizations in India are reportedly suspicious of the panel's intentions, according to an Indian news article that was forwarded to **USCIRF** from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. The panel's visit to India is "an attack on our religious sovereignty," a spokesperson for the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a right-wing Hindu organization, told the Navbharat Times.

Commissioners had planned to travel to Gujarat, Karnataka and Orissa - all areas where religiously motivated violence directed against minorities has been reported.

Shea said commissioners will look to experts and documentation to complete their report, though the trip would have been a chance for the Indian government to participate in preventive strategies at the local and national levels.